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ABSTRACT

Drawn from a much more extensive research project about children and television, this study examined the social processes through which the meanings of television are established and negotiated. A series of small group interviews with boys aged between 8 and 12 years were conducted. Two series of interviews focused on the cartoon television series "Thundercats," which has provoked adult criticism for its alleged violence and sexism. Results indicated that the program was perceived as strongly gendered by the children, and this led to gendered positions and discourses, yet these positions and discourses did not derive primarily from television, nor was television's role within them straightforward. Another interview was conducted with two eight-year-old working-class boys about the domestic viewing context. Results indicated that the boys were constantly putting themselves at risk--primarily of humiliation or ridicule by each other--and then rapidly withdrawing. An interview with three 12-year-old middle-class boys concerned their liked and disliked characters on television. Results indicated that there was a remarkable absence of "drooling" among the boys for the female characters. For boys of this age, the discussion of sexuality may hold more dangers than pleasures, in that their own power and security are so uncertain. Findings suggest that, at least to some extent, masculinity is actively defined and constructed in the direct experience of social interaction. (Nine extracts from the interviews and 29 footnotes are included.) (RS)

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BOYS' TALK:
TELEVISION, MASCULINITY AND MEDIA EDUCATION

Paper presented to the annual meeting
of the American Educational Research Association
San Francisco, April 1992

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The media, alongside other cultural artefacts such as books and toys, are often seen to play a central role in reinforcing negative gender stereotypes. While the media are routinely condemned for their lack of positive female role models, they are also seen to provide the raw material for boys' fantasies of power and violence. Many comics, films and television programmes, it is argued, portray a landscape of war, death and destruction, peopled with impossibly muscular superheroes and bristling with the technology of cars, computers, robots and weapons. In this world, 'real men' are fearless and invulnerable, unburdened by emotion or sensitivity to others. And while these fantasies are seen to be manifested directly in boys' aggressive play, they are also considered to exert a powerful influence on their everyday social behaviour.

Yet if anti-sexist education and childrearing is essentially about 'empowering' girls, there is much less certainty about what it might involve for boys. This is partly because boys' assertiveness and apparent self-confidence are generally seen as positive qualities. 'Disempowering' boys - forcing them to give up male power and privilege - may conflict with the desire not to hold back one's own child, or indeed one's students [1]. For many parents - myself included - the attempt to police or censor the material which is assumed to influence children's behaviour often proves counter-productive. Boys' ability to turn everyday household objects into lethal weapons often seems unbounded. Likewise, a great deal of anti-sexist teaching has foundered on boys' ability to take on feminist arguments without necessarily changing their own behaviour, and even to marshal those arguments for their own purposes [2]. What to do about boys remains a difficult, if not intractable, problem.

Gender, sex roles and the media

Conventional approaches to studying children's acquisition of gendered identity have largely been based on the notion of 'sex roles'. According to social learning theory, children learn to become boys or girls through a process of conditioning. They observe role models of acceptable male or female behaviour, and their attempts to imitate the appropriate model are then positively reinforced through rewards and other forms of social approval [3].

This behaviourist argument is particularly prevalent in psychological research on the media. Here, the media are regarded as an extremely powerful source of stereotyped role models which children simply absorb and internalise. Children are seen as 'bombarded' by stereotypes, and as effectively helpless in the face of the onslaught. Media messages are typically conceived as uniformly sexist, and thus as inevitably producing sexist attitudes [4].

However, as Lynne Segal [5] has argued, there are a number of significant problems with this approach. Sex roles are seen here as unremittingly coercive, and the acquisition of gendered identity is regarded as a smooth and unproblematic process which is achieved once and for all in childhood. As Segal suggests, this approach ignores the dynamic complexity and the contradictions of actual gender relations, in favour of a view of individuals as unitary and wholly conformist. Children, in this account, are regarded merely as passive recipients of adults' attempts at socialisation, rather than having any active part in determining their own social identities. This approach defines the process in individualistic terms, as something that happens inside people's heads, rather than in and through social interaction.

In the case of media research, this view shares many of the limitations of the behaviourist approach to studying the effects of television violence. Children are seen here as little more than 'television zombies', passively absorbing everything they see. As Kevin Durkin [6] has demonstrated, this approach drastically underestimates the diversity of television itself, and of the ways in which children makes sense of it. Furthermore, the notion of 'stereotypes' as simply inaccurate fails to acknowledge their complex social functions or to explain the reasons for their continuing power [7].

This idea of individuals as helplessly conditioned into rigid sex roles leads in turn to some highly deterministic research methods, which effectively produce the differences they purport to identify. For example, research on pre-school children's use of toys has pointed to consistent gender differences. Yet such studies often begin by choosing toys that would be most likely to produce these differences. In reality, it would seem that children spend most of their time playing with toys which are not gender-differentiated. Furthermore, as Henshall and McGuire argue, the differences demonstrated in this research are relatively small, and seem to be largely dependent upon the characteristics of the group and of the context in which they are observed [8]. Despite the endless search for innate differences between the sexes, the picture that emerges from such work is one of massive psychological similarity [9].

These problems are also apparent in research on media audiences. For example, some recent studies have tended to conclude that men and women possess quite different 'cultural competencies' and use television in radically different ways. Yet such research has often failed to provide systematic comparisons between the two groups, and in certain cases has neglected to consider the influence of the research methods themselves [10]. Here again, the ideology of sexual difference often seems to be written in to the initial design of the research.

Finally, sex role theory would also appear to have some problematic implications in terms of education. Anti-sexist teaching materials in this area often appear to subscribe to a notion of media education as a form of 'demystification' [11]. According to this approach, the objective, rational analysis of media stereotypes is seen as a means of liberating students from false ideologies. Perhaps paradoxically, this approach appears to overestimate both the power of the media and the possibilities for changing students' consciousness. By isolating the media from other social experiences and by ignoring the social context of teaching and learning, it offers an account of media education which can only be described as utopian.

The context of research

In this paper, I want to suggest a rather different approach to these issues. I will be considering a series of extracts taken from small-group interviews with boys aged between 8 and 12, which range widely across different aspects of film and television. Rather than regarding masculinity as something simply fixed or given, I want to suggest that it is, at least to some extent, actively defined and constructed in social interaction. In studying boys' talk, we may begin to identify some of the inconsistencies and contradictions which are at stake in this process, and hence some of the possibilities of change.

This material is drawn from a much more extensive research project about children and television, which I have described in detail elsewhere [12]. Among other issues, the research was particularly concerned with the relationships between children's talk about television and the social and interpersonal contexts in which it occurs. Rather than regarding talk as a transparent reflection of what goes on in people's heads, I have attempted to analyse talk as a social act which serves specific social functions and purposes.

In adopting this approach, the research has sought to move beyond deterministic accounts of the relationship between people's social positions and the ways in which they make sense of television - the implication that people read programmes in a given way because they are working-class, or male, or because of some other single demographic fact about them. By contrast, I have argued that social identities are both material and discursive. Thus, being male is on one level a straightforward biological fact. Yet what it means to be male - or to be 'masculine' - is a matter of social definition.

These arguments have several implications in terms of how we present and analyse children's talk. Rather than regarding interview groups as homogeneous, and as straightforwardly 'representative' of broader social categories, we need to pay much closer attention to what goes on within the group. In

particular, we need to consider the functions of talk in terms of the shifting power-relationships both within the group and between the group and the interviewer. These relationships will in turn reflect broader relationships of social power - although they will also inflect them in particular ways.

This approach is thus part of a move within audience research to locate the use of media within the broader context of social relationships and practices [13]. From this perspective, the construction of meaning from television is regarded not as a matter of the isolated individual's encounter with the screen, but as a fundamentally social process, in which talk itself plays a significant part.

Policing mascu.inity

I would like to illustrate some of these arguments by considering a couple of brief extracts from discussions recorded during the pilot stage of the research. These discussions focused primarily on US cartoon series, and included a screening of an episode of Thundercats - a series which had provoked considerable adult criticism for its alleged violence and sexism. The first extract, taken from the very beginning of one discussion, features a group of five 7-8 year old boys. I have started by explaining to the group what we will be doing, and that I will also be talking to some groups of girls.

Extract 1

Rodney: Have they [the girls] got My Little Pony cartoons to watch, same as us, we've got=

Int: =No, they're going to watch Thundercats as well.

Boys: Oh... [...]

Richard: They ain't for girls.

Anthony: Anyone can / they can watch it!

Robert: Yeah, it can be for girls and boys.

Rodney: Yeah, girls can watch it.

Gareth: It's sexist. It can be for girls and boys. Like, a girl / like, girls are in it. Like, Cheetara's in it. Cheetara's in Thundercats. Cheetara's a girl.

Rodney: She's a woman, you idiot.

For both the boys and the girls, the issue of gender was a central preoccupation here right from the start. Clearly, the decision to use single-sex groups was likely to accentuate

this, although the heavy gender stereotyping of the cartoons themselves undoubtedly played a part [14]. As this brief extract indicates, the question of whether the programmes themselves were 'for boys' or 'for girls' as well - and the criteria one might use to establish this - were a major focus of debate.

Despite Richard's assertion, there was a clear distinction here between the boys and the girls. While the girls tended to define themselves against the cartoons, identifying them as 'for boys' - and, by extension, as 'babyish' and immature - the younger boys were much more interested in celebrating their own preferences. Predictably, their discussion was largely concerned with the display of technology, violence and physical power, and much less with the complexities of the narrative or the relationships between the characters.

This assertion of tastes and preferences is clearly more than a personal matter [15]. On the contrary, statements about what you like or dislike provide a powerful means of defining the 'self' and its relation to others. While this may not always be an explicit or self-conscious process - or even a matter of 'impression management' - the centrality of gender undoubtedly made it so here. In taking up a position on the cartoons, the children were also consciously claiming a particular 'subject position', effectively defining themselves as 'masculine' or 'feminine'.

Thus, what is notable even in the above extract is the boys' use of a 'meta-discourse' which enables them to distance themselves from their own preferences and to reflect upon them in gendered terms. This is implicit, I would suggest, in Rodney's initial reference to My Little Pony - a programme none of the girls here were at all interested in, and which was only referred to in the context of these kinds of arguments, as a quintessentially 'girly' programme. In effect, this reference 'cues' a set of more general arguments and understandings - that is, a discourse - about gender differences.

However, this 'meta-discourse' is most apparent in Gareth's use of the term 'sexist' - although it is notable that this is used not as a criticism of the cartoons themselves, but to counter Richard's argument about their gender bias. Here, the main criterion for establishing the gendered address of a text is a numerical one: if there are girls (or women) in it, then it can qualify as being 'for girls'. While they are not yet acknowledging more complex arguments about tokenism, the boys are already beginning to co-opt the anti-sexist arguments to vindicate their own preferences. Interestingly, it was only the boys who used the word 'sexism', suggesting that they felt on particularly uncertain ground here.

The next extract is taken from a discussion with another group of boys, and addresses these potential criticisms of the

cartoons more directly. In this group, Vinh and Daniel are aged nine, Darren and Colin eleven.

Extract 2

Vinh: I think that Three Musketeers [Dogtanian] is quite racist.

Darren: Racist, why?

Vinh: Because it's always a boy going on heroes and all that stuff. Why couldn't it be a girl?

Darren: There is a girl. Milady. And Juliet.

Vinh: But why isn't Juliet doing all the adventures?

Int: So what do the girls or women do in Dogtanian?

Vinh: All they do is walk away, like, wiggling their bums.

[...]

Vinh: See, I told you it was quite racist. Why can't it be a man going down the street wiggling his bum instead of a woman? [Laughter]

Daniel: Men do wiggle.

Colin: Let's see you do it, then, Daniel, go on! [Laughter]

Vinh: See, why couldn't a man be captured and a woman capture him?

Int: Have you ever seen that in a cartoon on TV?

Colin, Darren: Yeah. She-Ra. Yeah. Always does. And Thundercats.

Colin: But it's only because He-Man was made and people were saying it was sexist. They made He-Man first but I reckon that people were saying that it was sexist and everything so they made She-Ra.

Vinh: She-Ra is the opposite of He-Man.

Int: So do you watch She-Ra? Do you like that?

Vinh: Yeah! He-Man, She-Ra, my best programme!

Others: No.

Colin: I watch it, but only because there's nothing on the other side.

Vinh: I don't! She-Ra's my best programme!

Int: OK, tell me what you like about She-Ra.

Vinh: Me? Because she always goes 'I am She-Ra!' and she hold up her magic power.

Darren: And then her legs look really sexy! [Whistles]

[Laughter]

Here again, the boys are broadly familiar with the anti-sexist discourse, although they employ it in more subtle ways. Their criteria are not simply to do with head-counting, as in the previous group: they are also concerned with comparing male and female roles, and (albeit ambiguously) with the emphasis on female sexuality.

However, Vinh's confusion between racism and sexism is revealing. Here again, it should be emphasised that this issue was introduced 'spontaneously', rather than in response to a question from the interviewer. Nevertheless, as an adult, the interviewer is almost inevitably identified as a kind of teacher, and his presence may well cue responses which in one way or another reflect this. In this case, I would suspect that the anti-sexist discourse derives primarily from the school, where racism and sexism (and other 'isms') are likely to be dealt with together as aspects of 'equal opportunities'. Vinh's eagerness to introduce and pursue these issues may well reflect a desire to 'please teacher'.

At the same time, there are tensions within the group, with the older boys effectively 'policing' the younger ones. Thus, Darren consistently questions Vinh's criticisms, providing counter-examples to undermine his arguments. In his final contribution, Vinh's enthusiastic celebration of She-Ra's power at the moment of her transformation is undermined by Darren's re-assertion of her status as a 'sex object', produced for the male gaze. In the process, Vinh's identification with (or at least imitation of) a female super-hero is clearly defined as inappropriate and even immature, by contrast with Darren's more 'adult' reading.

Colin's role here is rather more complex. Throughout these discussions, he was concerned to make distinctions between himself and the younger children (at one point saying 'I'm eleven, I'm big'), and to appear adult and worldly-wise. During the screening of Thundercats, he kept up a stream of modality judgments, pointing out continuity mistakes and questioning the plausibility of the action. The way in which he disclaims his interest in the cartoons here is also highly indicative, as is his cynicism about the programme's producers - although neither statement necessarily implies an acceptance of the criticisms of the cartoons themselves. At the same time, he also undermines Daniel's attempt to support Vinh's

argument, shaming him by calling for a display of 'effeminate' behaviour. Here again, potential deviance from the masculine line results in humiliation and laughter.

In analysing these extracts, I have sought to move beyond a deterministic account of the relationship between television and children's gendered identities. On the one hand, I would certainly wish to refute the idea that these programmes simply 'produce' sexist attitudes. The programmes were perceived as strongly gendered by the children themselves, and this undoubtedly led to gendered positions and discourses being invoked in the discussions. Yet these positions and discourses do not derive primarily from television, nor is television's role within them necessarily straightforward: even in these highly-charged exchanges, for example, it was possible for Vinh to express an enthusiasm for a female super-hero which was clearly seen by the other boys as immature, if not downright deviant.

Furthermore, there were contradictions within and between these various discourses: despite the ambiguities here, the children themselves were capable of some complex - and indeed even cynical - judgments about the sexism of television. While some of the boys tended to use the anti-sexist discourse as a means of displaying their own sophistication, or indeed simply of justifying their own preferences, it also offered them the possibility of reflecting on their own and others' tastes.

On the other hand, I would also wish to question the idea that gender positions - or indeed sexist attitudes - are fixed and pre-given, and that this in turn determines how the programmes will be read. Even in this comparatively 'extreme' situation - extreme in the sense that gender was so obviously at stake - there were uncertainties and divisions among the groups which cannot easily be reduced to a single gender position.

In the case of the boys' discussions, and I would argue more broadly, masculinity is actively produced and sustained through talk. Far from being unitary or fixed, it is subject to negotiation and redefinition as the talk proceeds. Masculinity, we might say, is achieved rather than given. It is something boys <u>do</u> rather than something that is done to them - although, equally, it is something they can attempt to do to each other. 'Doing masculinity' can therefore take a variety of forms and serve a variety of purposes in different social contexts. While it undoubtedly represents a claim for social power, that claim can be resisted or redefined, with a variety of consequences. It is to the contradictions of 'doing masculinity' that my account now turns.

Talking masculinity

While there are undoubtedly some problems in the account I have just outlined - and I shall return to these in my

conclusion - this approach does find some support in recent work on masculinity. Lynne Segal [16], in her invaluable overview of research in this field, argues that masculinity should be regarded not as a fixed and singular possession, but on the contrary as insecure and fragile, and in need of constant reassertion. Becoming masculine is not something which is achieved once and for all in childhood: it is part of an ongoing struggle to overcome an underlying sense of contradiction, ambivalence and incompleteness. Learning masculinity is about learning a code - or at least learning to appear to others as though one conforms to a code - rather than simply being slotted into a pre-determined role [17].

Using psychoanalytic theory, Segal argues that this process depends primarily upon the rejection or repression of the feminine 'other', and that this often takes the form of homophobia - that is, the rejection of the 'effeminate homosexual', or of any form of behaviour which would seem to carry these connotations. Homophobia is thus a primary element in the construction and maintenance of masculinity, and provides the central rationale for men's policing of their own and each other's behaviour.

Likewise, in his 'critical autobiography', David Jackson [18] argues that masculinity is defined as much in relation to other men as it is in relation to women. Establishing masculinity involves exerting power over weaker, more vulnerable men, and entails a ritualistic rejection of deviance, of the 'other' that is feared. Thus, for many men (myself included), adolescence is characterised by a fear of being labelled homosexual by other boys. The attempt to evade this charge has physical dimensions - in terms of controlling one's gestures and posture, for example, and following certain prescriptions in terms of the style and colour of one's clothes. Yet, as Jackson argues, it is particularly manifested in talk, in the kind of 'banter' which goes on between boys:

> In the non-adult public arena, especially from the age of 13 to 17, my language use became much more careful, guarded and defensive. If I didn't watch my back I'd be stabbed with verbal darts before I had time to turn around... The mocking, teasing, ridiculing of anything slightly out of the ordinary (or a physical defect or weakness) was a powerful pressure towards linguistic conformity in becoming 'one of the lads', or rather one of those marginal boys who hovered, uneasily, at the fringes of the group...
>
> The penalty for not joining in on the endless repartee, wisecracking and banter was to be made the butt of jokes, or to be labelled 'sissy' or 'queer' [19].

Jackson argues that banter and teasing, for example in the form of mock insults and fights, is a central means whereby

the 'homosexual' is repressed and masculinity sustained - although, as he also suggests, it may often reflect unacknowledged homoerotic desires. While banter is thus part of male bonding - and is undoubtedly pleasurable for this reason - it can also be wounding and self-alienating, even for heterosexual men.

In my own research, the implicit 'educational' framing of the interviews inevitably meant that these characteristics of masculine talk were less apparent than they might have been in the playground, for example. Nevertheless, particularly when it came to single-sex groups, the boys were often much less mutually supportive than the girls. In mixed groups, girls generally spoke more, and boys were often reluctant to volunteer their opinions even when asked. There was often a sense that in talking about certain aspects of television, boys were unavoidably putting themselves on the line, and rendering themselves open to ridicule and possible humiliation from their peers.

On the line: Allan and Chris

In this section and the next, I want to develop these arguments by considering some more extended extracts from the interviews, again with all-boy groups. The first of these features two eight-year-old working-class boys, Allan and Chris, talking to a male interviewer. In this instance, the interview was based around a set of questions about the domestic viewing context, although the discussion ranged much more widely.

Allan and Chris began by talking about some 'scary' films they had watched on video:

Extract 3

Allan: Whenever my mum or my dad are watching something horrible, um like Nightmare on Elm Street and // and um (?Deleted) Ghosts

Int: So you don't like that sort of stuff, right? Why's that, you just get too frightened?

Allan: Yeah / and um // Terminator

Chris: Terminator ain't scare, scary /

Allan: I watched it before, but it's a bit scary, so I don't really like it.

Int: So what happens then, you go off to your own room, yeah?

Allan: Yeah / [and /

Int: [What about=

Allan: =And Commando, I don't like that, it's too scary.

Int: Is that, it's a war film, isn't it, yeah?

Allan: Yeah, and there was another one, Applause, all this army, and there was this lady and she was trying to get away, and then they left her for a while, and then they thought that she was getting away, that was about an hour, I was watching it for about an hour, and then when she got killed, I had, I just went into my bedroom and watched um Catchphrase.

Int: So you didn't like it then, when she got killed?

Allan: And I know a really good one, Mac and Me.

Int: Mac and Me, what's that then? Is that a cartoon?

Allan: No, it's a film. It's a bit sad.

Throughout this discussion, there was an interesting ambivalence about 'scary' films. For both boys and girls, these films carried a considerable degree of peer group status. Many of the working-class children in particular offered detailed accounts of 18-rated films, both of the violent action genre (as in this case) and of horror films such as Nightmare on Elm Street. Yet these were often characterised by an uneasy combination of excitement and disgust. While many were keen to assert that the films were not scary (as Chris does here), this was often disputed.

In an earlier discussion, Allan had in fact offered a very detailed retelling of Terminator, focusing directly on the violence. In that discussion, he had been the only boy in the company of four girls, and had an increasingly desperate struggle to gain the chance to speak. Choosing to talk about Terminator partly seemed to do the trick, although even this was not wholly successful in silencing the girls. Here, he is much more willing to admit that he was scared by the film, and seeks to redirect the discussion to the safer territory of Mac and Me. While it would seem from this account that his parents do not prevent him from viewing this kind of material (although this is contradicted later on, as we shall see), Allan effectively seeks to regulate his own viewing by physically removing himself from the room and escaping to his bedroom to watch a game show.

Despite Chris's rejection of the notion that he might be scared by such films, he does in fact admit to this a little later in the discussion. Significantly, however, this comes at a point where Allan has briefly left the room:

Extract 4

Chris: My dad's got a lot of them [videos] and he gave it to me and my mum, and it's a Karate one, and it's very deadly and, one of, was very scary, the worsest one, and I started to cry.

Int: Yeah. And what was that, what was that called?

Chris: I don't know.

Int: Don't know. And what made you cry, just cause it was very / there was a lot of fighting in it or something, yeah?

Chris: No, there was this boy right, and he was very good at karate and he was Chinese [Allan returns] and there was this big, this big man and he was the deadly one at karate, and then in one of the, near the end, there was the boy, he was learning more karate and the big man / didn't um / didn't know so / the big man had to um / had to / can't remember.

Chris's tone of voice becomes much more enthusiastic when Allan returns to the room, although he is eventually unable - or perhaps unwilling - to pursue his retelling. Significantly, his accounts of this film (which I suspect is Karate Kid) and of another karate film he described in more detail focus centrally on the threat posed to the boy by the 'big man', and on the boy's eventual success in defeating him. At least potentially, the films explore and offer fantasy solutions to young boys' anxieties about their own physical weakness: yet by refusing the suggestion that he finds them 'scary', or only admitting to it when Allan is out of the room, Chris effectively disavows this anxiety.

A further contradiction emerges later in the interview around the discussion of parental regulation. In general, the children, and particularly the boys, were keen to assert that they were not restricted by their parents, either in terms of what they watch or in terms of their general behaviour - although these accounts were often contradicted by those of the parents themselves. Throughout this discussion, there is an ongoing competition about who is the least restricted by parental authority - for example, in terms of when they have to go to bed or whether they have to ask permission to go out to the park. What is clearly at stake here, and seems to infuse much of the discussion as a whole, is the attempt to claim a more 'adult' position, although in general Allan is much less interested in this than Chris, whose resistance to parental authority was carried over into his behaviour in school. This kind of bravado is also apparent in the discussion of television:

Extract 5

Int: So do you have, are there programmes that your mum says that you can't watch / Chris?

Chris: Nn-nn.

Int: Nothing at all. So you can watch what you like, yeah?

Allan: Except for the ones your dad says you can't watch.

Int: / Yeah.

Allan: I can't watch Terminator / I can't watch / I can't watch Commando. I've watched it before, when my dad was at work.

Int: Right, but your dad doesn't like you watching those, then. So why? Why does he say that?

Allan: Because um, because he thinks I'm having nightmares about it.

.
.
.

Int: So have you ever had dreams about stuff you've seen on TV? Chris, what about you?

Chris: Ummm, no.

Allan: I did. Lion, Witch and the Wardrobe. I dreamt that all of them were on to me. And Aslan came and he roared at me and he bit me.

Int: Really. Cause he doesn't bite people on TV, does he? He doesn't bite people in the programme.

Chris: He's not a real lion anyway.

Int: No.

Allan: I had a dream that he was a real lion.

Chris: Me?

Allan: No, I did. /

Chris: You had, that I was a real lion?

Allan: Yes, you was the lion!

Here again, Allan is much more willing to admit to being distressed or frightened - although the example he discusses in fact relates not to a forbidden 18-rated film, but a children's TV programme which was widely praised for upholding the best BBC traditions of 'quality' drama. As I have argued elsewhere [20], what children find frightening is often hard to predict, and what they say about this is not necessarily the most accurate guide. Chris's use of modality judgments -

'he's not a real lion anyway' - is typical of the ways in which the children used their knowledge of the production process, and particularly of special effects, to defend themselves from potential distress. Certainly for some of the older boys, learning to watch horror was very much a matter of learning not to display your own fear - a process in which fathers and older brothers appeared to play a key role. Nevertheless, in the hinterland of dreams - or indeed in the moment of viewing itself - such defences may prove less than effective [21].

As I have noted, the competition over parental regulation is part of a broader battle for status between the two boys. Allan admits to a greater degree of parental regulation here - although this account partly conflicts with the kind of self-regulation he describes in Extract 3. At the same time, he also undermines Chris's 'adult' position by referring to the fact that his father regulates his viewing.

Yet this battle for status recurs throughout. In the final exchanges here, and at a number of other points in the interview, the boys engage in a kind of banter which is based on wilful misinterpretation. Later, there is an extended comparison of their collections of TV toys, which culminates in a competition over the size and prowess of their toy robots: Allan claims that his robot is able to make potato chips, while Chris caps this by claiming that his had gone out shopping! Finally, asked who he would like to be if he could be on TV, Chris responds by saying that he would be the robot on Lost in Space - a metaphor of contemporary masculinity if ever there was one.

The final extract from this discussion returns to material which was rather more problematic, at least from the boys' point of view. The Australian soap opera Neighbours was at this time extremely popular with children generally, although the boys were much more guarded in talking about it:

Extract 6

Int: But you quite like Neighbours, then, yeah?

Allan: Yeah.

Int: So tell me what you like about Neighbours, then? Who / who /

Allan: It's got a pretty girl in it. [laughter]

Int: Who's that, then, which pretty girl?

Allan: Kylie Minogue.

Int: Kylie, yeah.

Chris: She's not pretty, she's ugly, I don't like her. I like Daphne.

Allan: Uuuugh!

Chris: No, I don't like Daphne, I don't like any of them, I just like the programme.

Int: Mmm, so who's your best character, then? In Neighbours.

Allan: Err, Jason Donovan / Scott.

Int: Yeah. So what do you like about him, then? /

Chris: He's a crap singer.

Allan: No, Mark. Mark. He looks cool.

Int: Uhuh. / All right. What about you, Chris, who's you best character in it?

Chris: Ummm, no-one.

Int: No-one. / So what things that have happened in Neighbours [have you thought have been good?

Allan: [Who is no-one anyway?

Chris: [laughter] No-one. I don't like any of them.

Int: So what things that have happened in Neighbours do you think have been good? Chris.

Chris: What?

Int: What things have happened in Neighbours that you think have been good?

Chris: Um / er / I don't know.

What is particularly striking here is the way in which the boys seek to disclaim their preferences. For some reason, the naming of female characters appears too risky: both the characters named earn abuse from the other boy, and Allan progressively retreats to 'safer' male characters. There is further linguistic banter here, as Allan wilfully misinterprets Chris's statement; and Chris eventually retreats altogether, refusing the interviewer's attempts to find another way in to the topic.

Throughout this discussion, then, there is a sense in which the boys are constantly putting themselves at risk - primarily of humiliation or ridicule by each other - and then rapidly withdrawing. Statements are made and then repeatedly

contradicted or revised, and there are many inconsistencies in their individual accounts. It is as though they tentatively raise their heads above the parapet, only to be knocked down. In general, Allan is more comfortable with this than Chris, who often refuses to pursue lines of discussion which he perceives to be dangerous. Like the robot in Lost in Space, Chris seems to be drawing a protective shell around himself, in his attempts to be self-contained and invulnerable.

Sex talk: Sean, Peter and Petros

For the older boys, this process was less fraught with contradictions, not least because they had a wider repertoire of strategies for avoiding such 'risks'. Nevertheless, there were points at which this broke down, with some interesting consequences.

This was particularly apparent in one of the activities, in which the children were invited to discuss liked and disliked characters in film and television [22]. In this case, the differences between the girls' and the boys' groups were particularly striking, not least on a statistical level. While both boys and girls were more likely to say that they liked male characters, this was particularly marked among the boys. Furthermore, while boys nominated as many 'likes' as girls, their tendency to name 'dislikes' increased with age, and was heavily weighted towards female characters. Boys were much less likely than girls to offer positive comments about characters' physical attractiveness, but much more likely to offer negative ones. Boys were also more likely to talk about actors rather than characters, and to favour comic characters and the comic attributes of otherwise 'serious' characters.

In order to explain the reasons for these differences, however, it is important to consider the interview context. In general, the boys appeared to find this activity comparatively threatening, and often sought to redefine it in such a way as to avoid their own masculinity being put at risk. Thus, while many of the girls were quite comfortable talking about who they 'fancied', the boys found this much more awkward: such statements - or in some cases, any positive statement about a female character - often led to ridicule, as they did in the case of Allan and Chris. Likewise, while girls often described female characters as attractive, boys never referred to male characters in this way, except where they identified this as an opinion held by girls (and from which they generally dissented).

What appeared to inform the boys' anxiety was a fear of humiliation at the hands of other boys, although this took a variety of forms. The accusation that one might 'identify' with a female character, or that one might 'fancy' a male character, was clearly to be avoided at all costs. Yet, as in the case of Chris and Allan's discussion of Neighbours, even

the possibility that one might 'fancy' a female character was somehow problematic.

In this context, talking about comic characters - or redefining serious characters as 'funny' - provided a convenient way of avoiding the issue. Likewise, vilifying characters (and particularly female ones) for being 'ugly' or 'stupid' allowed the boys to occupy a safe position, which merely confirmed their own superiority. Talking about the actor rather than the character enables you to present yourself as a budding film critic, while also absolving you from the possible accusation that you 'identify' with him - or, even worse, that you 'fancy' him.

Nevertheless, this process was not always easy. The following extracts, which are taken from a discussion with three 12-year-old middle-class boys, illustrate some of the tensions which were at stake. On this occasion, the boys were involved in a discussion about modality, in which they were asked to rank programmes as more or less 'realistic' [23]. The interviewer here was female.

The first extract focuses on the US series Baywatch, which features the adventures of a group of Californian coastguards. Sean begins by criticising the programme as 'unrealistic' on the grounds that 'it's made to look sunny all the time', although he and Petros quickly move on complain about the muscular appearance of the male characters. Sean argues that 'it's just sort of a bit over-exaggerated, it's the um / the people on it are sort of complete hunks and you know all the girls are drooling over them and everything'. Sean's comments are disputed by Peter, who claims superior knowledge of the setting based on a holiday in Florida. These arguments are developed as follows:

Extract 7

Sean: But, but, but I'd say there be like // they haven't got any sort of middle size people. All the ladies are immaculate, and all the men are immaculate, there's no sort of middle size people who aren't so //

Int: Who aren't so perfect.

Sean: [Yeah.

Petros: [Even, even the boy that's about thirteen years old, he's got //

Int: =He's got [muscles as well?

[laughter]

Int: Is that right? I must check - I've watched it a couple of times. His father's Mitch isn't he?

Sean: Yeah.

Int: The one who's in charge of the life - patrol?

Sean: Even Hobie - that's the kid - a sort of a sex symbol with all the [girls.

Petros: [(laughs) Yeah [I know.

Int: [Is that right?

Sean: Yeah, they all have posters of him. It's really=

Peter: =Yeah, even in our class. [(...) they've got posters of him on the desk.

Sean: [It's really pathetic, to be honest but=

Int: =Why? I mean, because he's not worthy to be fancied or?

Sean: No - but he's, he's // [all the girls go <u>mad</u> over it.

Peter: [They build it up like that especially for the programme.

Int: What - this character?

Petros: Yeah!

Peter: They make him build up his muscles just for the programme, to give him an image in the programme. [They need to build (...)

Sean: [(He doesn't look like nothing like he?) is in the programme.

Peter: Yeah!

Sean: You see without all that make-up on, he's probably just the same as - he - probably just the same as someone in school, isn't he?

Int: Mm.

Sean: He's nothing special, just 'cause he's on a film that [makes him

Int: [Well - it adds a certain glamour doesn't it, if [you're on (...)

Sean: [But he's nothing special I wouldn't say, // [I think he looks ug - ugly to be honest but=

Petros: [
(apart?) from he's rich!

Int: =You think he does.

Peter: You would, wouldn't you Sean?

Sean: No, but I don't=

Petros: =It's because he's giving you too much competition!

[laughter]

Here, the boys combine statistical arguments - about the representation of 'middle-size people' as compared with 'hunks' - with assertions about the constructed nature of the programme - the use of bodybuilding and make-up - in what amounts to an attempt to cut the male characters down to their own size. What threatens Sean is not so much the physical power of the characters - which was partly an issue in the younger boys' account of the Karate films - as their sexual appeal, the fact that they make the women in the programme and indeed the girls in their own class 'drool'. In arguing that Hobie is 'just the same as someone in school', Sean attempts to allay his anxieties about his own sexual attractiveness - although, as Petros's final comment makes clear, his motivation is perhaps a little too transparent.

While there is certainly some evidence to support Sean's arguments from parallel interviews with the girls in this class, their responses were in fact rather more complex. While the girls who discussed these characters acknowledged that they were indeed 'hunks', they also complained that they had to act 'all macho', and laughed about the way they strutted around with their chests out. Nevertheless, as one girl argued, in Baywatch 'you don't really need a great actor, you just need to have hunks walking up and down the beach'. By condemning the girls' responses as merely 'pathetic', the boys fail to acknowledge that they may find these characters as 'unrealistic' as they do themselves.

Interestingly, however, the boys do not comment on the female characters in the programme, whose 'perfect' bodies are equally on display. As I have noted, the girls were much more interested in discussing the physical attractiveness of boys than vice-versa, and the gender of the interviewer seemed to make little difference to this. In general, there was a remarkable absence of 'drooling' among the boys - although this is an activity adult men are supposed to engage in all the time. For boys of this age, the discussion of sexuality may well hold more dangers than pleasures, in that their own power and security are so uncertain.

However, this issue was taken up explicitly in the discussion that followed. The boys described a class activity in which

they had been asked to name somebody they would like their mothers to choose for them to marry. Again, they expressed contempt for the girls' responses: according to Sean, 'all the girls were going [mimics:] "Oh! I hope my mum says Tom Cruise!"' In the extract that follows, the interviewer directly questions their account, with some interesting consequences:

Extract 8

Int: And what were the boys saying?

Sean: Nothing.

Int: Why weren't they?

Peter: Oh yeah, well you get Joe who says 'Um I want=

Sean: =Kim Basinger!

Peter: Yeah! Kim Basinger [and Jerry Hall

Sean: [Yeah, but none of the boys are really bothered about it because it's / just

Peter: Never going to happen!

Sean: Yeah, it's never going to happen - so I mean it's not really practical to think of really.

Int: / OK. It's meant to be sort of fantasy question, isn't it?

Sean: Yeah.

Int: It's not likely you are going to be - end up with Tom Cruise unless you're [extremely

Sean: [Yeah, but all the girls sort of think, imagine that if they say it will - it will. Just sort of

Petros: [They probably dream about it(?)

Int: [It strikes me that girls are more used to expressing those sorts of things 'cause they're encouraged to, whereas boys aren't in quite that way. Not till they're a bit older.

Petros: [Well, if you fancy someone like that, you keep it a secret.

Sean: [Well, there's all these - there's all these

Int: Yeah, why do you think that is?

Petros: 'Cause all the boys in our class spread it.

Peter: [laughs] Yeah! Basically.

Initially, the boys attempt to account for their apparent lack of interest in the activity by rejecting 'fantasy' - and by implication presenting themselves as more 'practical' and mature. However, it is again Petros - who in other discussions was often excluded or ridiculed by the other boys - who provides an alternative reason for this, noting the mockery which could be expected to accompany such statements (although he is obviously supported by the interviewer in doing so). This explanation is certainly illustrated by their disparaging comments about another boy, Joe, at the very start of the extract. The reasons why it should be taboo for boys to admit to 'fancying' female stars - notably in the company of <u>other boys</u>, rather than girls or female teachers - may become clearer as the discussion continues:

<u>Extract 9</u>

Sean: 'Cause there's all these sort of [male sex symbols

Int: [You got it!

Sean: But there isn't really like a lady superstar like you talk about all the time.

Int: What about Madonna? Isn't she?

Petros: She's not good looking, she can just sing!

Int: Mm.

Sean: And she's sort of a bit um [laughs]

Petros. =The last video's a bit /

Int: Raunchy?

Sean: Yeah!

Int: I think the word is. I haven't exactly seen it, but I've heard about it.

Petros: It's [been banned in the USA.

Peter: [It's a bit bad!

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Sean: No, but I mean you wouldn't exactly want a girl hanging round you, all she was doing was drooling in your ear and stuff. Would you? [Interviewer laughs]

Peter: She was doing a bit more than drooling in your ear (during?) the video.

Sean: She'll probably die of over- / over - sexing or something she's just / all she - all she=

Peter: =You know the thing that really gets me is that she goes into all this research for AIDS and a lot of money she makes she (Mm) puts into AIDS research and then she goes out and makes a video like that!

Sean: Yeah, making everybody want to 'do it'.

Peter: Exactly!.

Sean: See, if people who are sort of obsessed with her sort of made - might be influenced by / what she does

Int: But I mean do you think - is she not having - is she being serious when she does her videos do you think?

Petros: No - not really but she [did - she did say that she wouldn't mind having a family now, 'cause she's getting on a bit.

Sean: [But to someone who is sort of obsessed with her, 'cause she (.....) there's quite a lot of people who are sort of - obsessed with Madonna and like wherever she goes they go and they - there was one in America there was this group 'em - English band and they had this song and the background vocals were 'do it, do it, do it now!'

The boys' objections to Madonna - and their avoidance of the issue of sexuality - appear on one level to take an almost moralistic tone. They describe the video as 'a bit bad', and there is a brief discussion (omitted here) about the fact that it was eventually screened late at night - at a time when (presumably impressionable) young children would be unable to see it. Sean's final comment refers explicitly to discourses about the 'effects' of television - although typically, he displaces these onto 'other people' who are 'obsessed' and therefore seen to be particularly at risk. The mention of AIDS reinforces this moral stance, and leads to accusations of Madonna's hypocrisy.

Yet on another level, it is clear that Madonna's overt sexuality represents a considerable threat. This is partly a matter of excess - for example, in Sean's concerns about Madonna's 'over-sexing' and in his description of the video (in the section omitted here) as 'a bit too over-expressive for me'. More significantly, Sean also briefly imagines himself in the company of Madonna - although her 'hanging round' him and 'drooling' in his ear is somehow too disruptive and messy for him. Here again, the boys fail to consider the possibility of irony: Petros, for example, rejects the

interviewer's suggestion that Madonna might not be entirely serious, and takes refuge in the comforting thought of her settling down and having a family.

Here again, the discussion of television becomes an arena in which the boys attempt to stake out and sustain a 'masculine' subject position - albeit in an area where they appear distinctly vulnerable. In this case, however, the interviewer adopts a more distanced - and at times almost ironical - perspective. Her contributions often challenge the boys to be more explicit about what is taking place (as in extract 8), and her choice of Madonna - rather than, for example, Kim Basinger - clearly raises questions they find hard to accomodate. However indirectly, she forces the boys to 'account for themselves' and thus exposes some of the contradictions they might have preferred to avoid.

Conclusions: gender theory, research and education

Research and debate on masculinity has recently become something of an academic growth area - a phenomenon which has been greeted with justified suspicion by many feminists [24]. Certainly, there are significant dangers in the kind of analysis I have presented here. Emphasising the vulnerability and insecurity of masculinity - and even arguing that it is inherently oppressive of men - can easily become an excuse for ignoring the continuing realities of male power. This position is certainly a powerful option for 'non-sexist' men who wish to play feminism at its own game, and thereby exempt themselves from blame.

What this position appears to neglect is not simply the social and material dimensions of male power, but also the emotional investments which are at stake here. To present masculinity solely as an experience of suffering and self-alienation is to ignore the pleasure it entails, and the reasons why it is so attractive (at least for men) in the first place.

In addition, there are much broader theoretical problems with this view. There is certainly a danger in my own analysis here of lapsing into a 'dramaturgical' model of social interaction - a view of social life as a matter of putting on masks, or adopting roles, which have no necessary relationship with one's true identity [25]. This is of course to presume that there is an authentic self behind the mask, and that we would be able to identify it if we saw it.

Some postmodernist versions of discourse analysis would seem to lead to a similar approach - in effect, to a view of social life as a matter of taking on the discourses and subject positions which happen to be available. At its most 'extreme', however, this position appears to reject the notion that there is a reality that exists independently of discourse: far from positing a 'true self' behind or beyond

discourse, it suggests that the self is merely a 'point of intersection' of different discourses [26].

The problem with both approaches is that they would appear to ignore the apparent 'naturalness' and 'spontaneity' of gendered behaviour, and its consequences [27]. One could well argue that the taking on of gendered roles or discourses is much less a matter of free choice and conscious deliberation than this approach would suggest. Clearly, these roles or discourses are not equally available to all. 'Doing masculinity' is an option for men, but much less so for women; and it is more available for certain types of men than others, for reasons which are to do with biology (physical size and strength, for example) as well as social factors such as class. For children, as I have implied, age differences - and the social perception and construction of the meaning of those differences - are unavoidably significant. Furthermore, we need to consider the social and material consequences of 'doing masculinity'. Heterosexual male power is not simply a discursive game: the institutional, economic and physical dimensions of that power depend precisely on sustaining these discourses of 'true' masculinity.

In concentrating on the social processes through which the meanings of television are established and negotiated, there is a related risk of losing sight of the role of texts. Texts clearly do set constraints on the ways in which they can be read - and certainly in the case of many of the texts referred to here, may unavoidably raise issues of gender difference and sexuality. Much of the appeal of Baywatch, for example, is undoubtedly derived from its explicit display of male and female bodies. Likewise, Madonna explicitly and consciously plays with the conventions and boundaries of sexual expression - to the extent that the issue has become one of the most tiresome cliches in academic debate.

Furthermore, while the interpersonal dynamics are centrally important, it is vital to remember that we are dealing with groups of children artificially constructed as audiences for particular kinds of representations. 'Fancying' Madonna or Mitch in Baywatch is different from 'fancying' someone in your class at school - even if the boys here seem rather concerned about the nature of that difference. Likewise, while the violence of karate films may evoke anxieties about your own physical weaknesses, it is qualitatively different from the violence you are likely to encounter in real life. Talking about television is different from talking about your direct personal experiences, and children rarely lose sight of that difference.

Nevertheless, as I have shown, talking about television may be a particularly risky process for boys, particularly where it raises issues of sexuality and physical power, as in many of the programmes under discussion here. While they may seek to disavow their emotional responses by adopting a secure

'critical' perspective, tensions and contradictions are bound to surface.

Finally, while media education may play an important role in intervening in these processes, we should be cautious about over-estimating its consequences. Teaching about 'representations of masculinity' is inevitably a problematic process, whose more profound implications boys - and male teachers - may well attempt to avoid. Certainly in my own experience, it is tempting to take refuge in a superficial irony, satirising the grotesque excesses of an Arnold Schwarzenegger as a means of avoiding questions which are 'closer to home'. Equally, adopting a propagandist anti-sexist stance can easily lead to a form of political self-righteousness, in which the force of one's criticisms serves as a guarantee of one's own ideological correctness. To privilege 'critical analysis' is to run the risk of adopting a rationalistic position, which fails to engage with students' complex subjective investments in the media [28]. Such approaches may end up simply reinforcing the power of the teacher and of the male students, with an added gloss of political complacency.

On the other hand, we need to avoid the idea that 'saying how we really feel' is necessarily the path to political change, or to realising our 'true human potential' [29] - as if 'true feelings' could somehow be expressed irrespective of the context and the language in which we might do so. This approach offers an individualistic, psychotherapeutic response to what is ultimately a social and political problem. The power-relationships of the classroom - and teachers' complicity in those relationships - cannot be swept aside so easily.

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